

Official Records Cut John Shell's Age From 131 to 97 Years

Truth About Kentucky's Much Exploited "Oldest Living Man" Revealed by Doctor's Inquiry

By L. L. NASCHER, M. D.

SEE John Shell, the oldest living person in the world. Age 131 years. Admission ten cents. That tells the story. An enterprising lawyer came across a decrepit, weak minded old man who had no idea how old he was, and by the promise of "bushels of money," induced the old man to accompany him to fairs to be exhibited as the oldest man on earth. Knowing that it was impossible to obtain exact data as to John Shell's birth owing to lack of official records, and the difficulty in reaching persons who might throw some light upon the matter, his exploiters found it a simple matter to fool a gullible public and a keenly receptive press. For several months past newspapers throughout the country have been publishing lengthy accounts of the ancient Kentucky mountaineer, his mode of life, his views and other interesting facts concerning him.

Being especially interested in longevity I visited the old man recently for the purpose of making a medical examination of him and also to obtain from him such facts as to his life and mode of living as might enable others to reach the great age of 131 years that he was said to have attained. The ride of twenty miles from Hazard to Hyden, the county seat of Leslie county, Ky., partly on a springless mail wagon and partly on a razorback mule took a whole day.

From Hyden to Greasy Creek, where old John Shell lives, is another twenty miles, but I could cover only sixteen miles, to Henry Chappell's, in a day, riding a blind mare, the best I could get in Hyden. It is four miles from Chappell's to old John's house, thirteen miles from Shell's to Gatun on the other side of Pine mountain, and five miles from Gatun to Harlan, where I could get a train to Cincinnati. It is impossible to make the trip without a guide and guides are not very anxious to conduct strangers through this country.

Who Is the Centenarian Shell?

The exploiters of John Shell evidently figured upon these difficulties to discourage inquisitive investigators. John Shell is an old, illiterate, mental defective, whose statements about his age and his life are utterly unreliable. He is suffering from a garrulous form of senile dementia, with hallucinations and delusions, and the age, 131 years, has been so thoroughly drilled into him that he insists upon its correctness in spite of the most obvious discrepancies in dates and periods of time. At my interview with him there were present his wife and four-year-old child, my guide, Cad Collins, who has been range rider for the Peabody Coal Company for the last fourteen years, and Lee R. Dixon, surveyor and civil engineer of Hyden. Before visiting Shell I interviewed a number of persons in Hazard and Hyden who knew the old man. Among these were former Circuit Judge Faulkner, who had been Shell's lawyer at one time; former Circuit Judge Henry C. Eversole and his youngest brother, John C. Eversole, the present Circuit Court Justice of Kentucky. Judge Faulkner has known Shell for over thirty years, and was his attorney twenty years ago. Judge Faulkner

said Shell was insane about 1892 and for several years afterward, but his mind had cleared up sufficiently in 1897 to enable him to discuss land boundaries and point out boundary posts.

In 1911, while Judge Faulkner was on the bench, Shell was called as witness in a land suit, and he then said he thought he was born the same year as Lincoln (1809). That would make him 111 years of age. At his marriage in 1916 he said he was 107 years old, but he was not certain in what year he was born. Shell has a remarkable memory for names and locations, but when numbers, dates and duration of time are involved his statements are wild guesses. He told Judge Faulkner that his father fought in the second war with England, but the only definite statement that I could get from the old man concerning his father was that he and his father voted on opposite sides on the second constitution of Kentucky (adopted in 1850).

In Hyden I was lodged in the home of Robert Ray, one of the principal citizens of the town, and there I found Judge John C. Eversole, the Circuit Court Judge, who stopped at Mr. Ray's house during the court session. I also met there his brother, Henry C. Eversole, who had been Circuit Court Judge a number of years ago. Both brothers spoke freely about John Shell and the deception that had been practised in the exploitation of the old man. The former judge, who is now 68 years old, knows Shell since 1870 and spent a night in Shell's house in company with Judge Finlay in 1884. Shell was then between 60 and 65 years old. Shell then told the two men that his wife was a year younger than himself and that she was about 60. From the younger Eversole I learned the names of the children and their ages, and he also named the men who had induced the old man to go with them to the fairs. There were eleven children in all, nine of whom are still living. The oldest, Mary Huff, is now about 75 years old, and the next is William C. Shell, whom I saw later and who is about 72 years old. The youngest of the children, Emily, now dead, would be about 52 years old if she were still alive. The newspapers state that he had twenty-two children, that the oldest was about 100 and the youngest was 4. The youngest child is the child of his second wife, born before he married her.

Exploiters of the Old Man's Age.

In Hazard I learned that Rufus Roberts, the prosecuting attorney of Leslie county, was the man who had taken the old man to the fairs, and in Hyden I learned of three other men who were connected with the scheme. These were John Asher, a court clerk, who was associated with Roberts; one Marshall, secretary of an agricultural society, who arranged for the exhibition of the old man at the fairs, and Sherman Ludington, a relative of Shell, who urged the old man to accept Roberts' offer and who accompanied Shell as his caretaker.

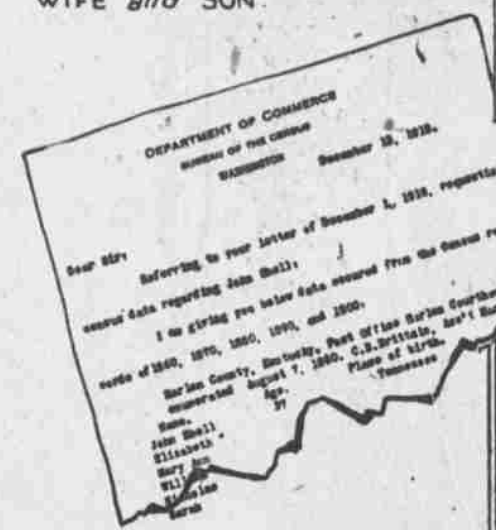
Henry M. Chappell—"Uncle Henry," as he is known in the neighborhood—is one of the richest and most influential citizens in this part of the State. He is 65 years old, the great-grandson of the first settler in this section, and has known John Shell since Shell moved to Greasy Creek in 1866.



JOHN SHELL. WIFE and SON.



JOHN SHELL'S HOUSE. FRONT VIEW.



Chappell said he did not know how old Shell was; in fact, never gave a thought to his neighbor's age until he heard that the old man had been exhibited at fairs as the oldest man on earth. Roberts and Asher claimed that as evidence of old Shell's age there was a tax receipt showing that he had paid poll tax in 1809 and that Chappell had also seen the tax receipt. Chappell denied having seen any such receipt, but heard of some old receipt, since publicity had been given to the old man's age.

As he was but 10 or 12 years old when Shell moved to his present home and Shell was then a man with ten children, he took no special interest in his new neighbors, and in more recent years the difference in their stations and education kept them apart. Shell was a poor, illiterate, ignorant mountaineer, who depended mainly upon his gun and his little garden patch for his existence, while Chappell was a fairly well educated and fairly well to do farmer and lumberman.

Description of John Shell.

The next morning we rode over to John Shell's shack. It is a miserable one room hovel, having one small window closed by a board, and the only light in the room came from the open door. In one corner of the room stood an old bed on which the aged mountaineer lay, huddled up and covered by a ragged crazy quilt and a coat. My guide introduced me as a man who had come to take him to New York, and he consented to get up and pose for a picture. He was so feeble that he had to be helped from the bed to a low chair before a log fire, and he sat there for nearly half an hour, getting warm. John Shell is the oldest individual I ever saw. He is decrepit, weakened, shriveled up, stooped, with bent back and knees, and unable to stand without the aid of a cane. If he could stand erect he would be 5 feet 6 inches tall, but in his bent posture he is 5 feet 2, and weighs 103 pounds. His body is wasted, skin dry; he has long, bony fingers, with cracked nails, and large, flat feet. He has a massive head of white hair, scrawny white beard, but no eyebrows or eyelashes. His eyes are gray, dull and bleary, and the eyelids are inflamed. He said he has had trouble with his eyes for the last twenty years, but he can still see well enough to kill a squirrel at 200 yards. His nose is large but thin, the cheeks are wasted and the skin is shallow, with dark brown freckle spots on the hands and chest.

It was stated that he has now his fourth set of teeth. The two broken fangs and three flat stumps in the lower jaw belong to his first adult set and the teeth in the upper jaw disappeared many years ago. The physical examination revealed no more than we would expect to find in a man of ninety or a hundred. There was hardening of the arteries but low blood pressure, as the heart action was very weak. His respiration was shallow, twenty a minute, his pulse was weak and irregular and beating sixty a minute.

Mentally he is a garrulous, senile dement, having hallucinations of sight and hearing and some delusions, is incapable of riveting his attention or drawing logical conclusions. His memory is poor, the recollection of early events coming spontaneously but rarely through an effort of the will. When asked who was the first President he voted for he said he did not know. A few minutes later, while speaking of something else, he recalled his vote on the second constitution of Kentucky. The only approximate date that he could give was the time when

he moved from Laurel Creek to Greasy Creek, a couple of years after the war. He began talking as soon as we had him seated in the chair by the log fire. He told us about voices he heard but no one else could hear, calling out "Holy Roller," "Holy Roller" and other voices calling "Pot Rack," "Pot Rack." He saw "haints" in the room and sometimes outside his window. At another time three "Holy Rollers" came to his door, but he recognized them as devils in disguise and he chased them away with his gun. During this recital I could not secure his attention long enough to answer a single question.

The Old Man Sure He Is 131.

I afterward asked him how old he was and he said "131 years," but a moment later he said "maybe 200 years; I don't know." His wife brought a paper box in which we found tax receipts for 1848 and 1849, the latter quite illegible, and a few receipts of later date, a receipt for payment of legal fees to Judge Faulkner, and a number of Confederate bills. There was no paper antedating 1848. I asked him why he went with Roberts. He said "Rufus Roberts and John Asher promised me \$200 if I would go to the fairs, and they said they would take care of me and pay all expenses and give me 'bushels of money' that they would get for me." "Who took care of you?" "Sherman Ludington, a relative, took care of me, and he got a lot of money from them." "Did you get the \$200?" "Roberts gave me \$199 but he kept all the other money he collected, and in Louisville somebody took \$20 out of my pocket while I was asleep." "I don't remember how long I was away. We went to a lot of fairs, and when I got sick they brought me home. They got bushels of money for me but they didn't give me any."

By suggestion and leading questions he could be made to give almost any desired reply, but I avoided this method of questioning. His wife was present during the interview, and occasionally made a comment or corrected some statement of the old man. Shell's relations with Roberts and Asher seemed to be so firmly impressed upon his mind that he answered questions relating to them without a moment's hesitation. I asked him questions about himself; family, mode of living, etc. He knew nothing about the second war with England; could not remember anything about the Mexican war,

WILLIAM C SHELL, SON OF JOHN SHELL (72), and WIFE STEWART SHELL GREAT GRANDSON OF JOHN SHELL (23) and WILLY SHELL GREAT, GRAND-SON OF JOHN SHELL (1 1/2 YEARS)

and took no part in the civil war, as he broke three ribs shortly before the war started, and these gave him trouble for several years. Judging from the Confederate bills in his box, to which he attached great value, he was probably a Southern sympathizer.

Arranging his statements in their proper order, he was born in Knox county, Tenn., came to southeastern Kentucky when he was about eighteen, travelled about the country for four years, hunting and trapping, married when he was twenty-two or twenty-three and settled down on Laurel Creek, about three miles from his present home. He lived there until the house got too small for himself, wife and eleven children, and he bought the present house and farm. This was a couple of years after the war. He said his wife died about five years ago, that she was nearly as old as he was and that they were married over eighty years. I then tried to show him the inconsistencies in his statements, pointing out his own statement that he was married to his first wife about eighty years, yet he said his oldest child was about a hundred years old, and if that child were only seventy-five, as Judge Eversole said, then his wife must have been over fifty when that child was born and about seventy-five when Emily, the youngest, was born. "Maybe she was," was his reply.

Living in the most primitive manner possible in a civilized community, ignorant, illiterate, miles from his nearest neighbor, he had neither the opportunity nor the desire to keep up with the times, and his views and opinions are those of a child. He never had a clock and couldn't tell time if he had one. He arose at daybreak and went to sleep when it became dark, summer and winter, though now he spends most of his time in bed. He ate when he was hungry, his fare consisting of the products of his little farm and what he could shoot or catch by trapping and fishing. He ate sparingly except when he shot possum, then he gorged himself. His principal vegetable dishes were corn, sweet potatoes and pumpkins. Sometimes he shot fish, this being considered a test of good marksmanship. His beverages consist of milk, water and a daily dram of "mountain dew."

The only regularity in his life was this daily dram of liquor; he had no other fixed habits. His only serious ailment occurred sixty years ago, when he fell and broke three ribs. This, he says, kept him out of

the war. His wife says he had the "flu" last winter but he recovered in a few days. Asked what he did when he was sick he said he took "yarks" that they found in the mountains; for injuries he used "yark" poultices, and for diseases he used "yark" tea. He said he kept a store in his house about fifty years ago, but there were no papers in his box that threw any light upon this. There were no books in his house, not even a Bible, and he learned what little information about the outside world that reached the valley from his children. Like all mountaineers of this section he learned to ride when a child and began to use a gun as soon as he was able to lift one to his shoulder.

In order to secure the old man's attention it was necessary to remind him repeatedly that I might take him to New York. He would then answer questions rationally for a few minutes until something would recall some fixed delusion and he would wander off until again reminded of New York. A simple test of his susceptibility to suggestion was made. I asked him if President Polk was the first President he voted for in these words: "Polk was the first President you voted for, wasn't he?" He said "Yes, I voted for Polk." A few minutes later I said, "You didn't vote for Polk, did you?" he said "No, I did not vote for Polk."

Secret of Shell's Longevity.

The secret of John Shell's longevity is undoubtedly his extraordinary constitution. He could not explain why he lived longer than any of his early friends, but thought it was because they did not use the right kind of "yarks."

Leaving John Shell's house I went four miles up the creek to see his eldest son, William C. Shell. On the way we met Allen H. Shell, William's only child, and his wife riding mule back to see the old man. Allen is 47 years old, has nine children and lives with his father and married son, William C. Shell is a tall, white haired mountaineer, but unlike the other people of this section, he is stout and inactive. He was evidently annoyed by the notoriety his father had received, but he answered questions that might clear up his father's age. He said he was 72 or 73 years old and his eldest sister, Polly Huff, was two or three years older. His father was about 23 when he married and thus was about 100, maybe a year or two older. He said he never heard of any records of his father's birth or marriage.

Stewart Shell, the son of Allen and grandson of William, answered most of the questions relating to his great-grandfather. Stewart is a bright, educated man of 23, the father of two children. Stewart said the press reports about the old man were a pack of lies throughout. One statement, probably a guess, might be true—that there were about two hundred descendants. Speaking of the tax receipt upon which Roberts and Asher based their estimate of the old man's age, Stewart said he never heard of a receipt dated 1809, but Asher claimed to have seen a receipt showing that John Shell paid taxes in Tennessee in 1820.

Official Records of Shell's Age.

The only official records of his age that I could find that might throw some light upon his real age were his statements when a witness in a land suit in 1911 that he was born in the same year that Lincoln was born (1809), and the age he gave (107) when he married his present wife in 1916. Upon my return I corresponded with the Director of the Bureau of the Census, the Hon. S. L. Rogers. Through his courtesy I obtained the official data, which clears the matter up as far as official records can clear it up. According to these reports John Shell is 97 or 98 years old.

This case is similar to the famous case of Noah Raby, who died in Piscataway, Ala., house, New Jersey, a few years ago. Raby was supposed to be 137 years old, "the oldest man on earth." No attempt was made during his life to verify this age, but after his death the Bureau of the Census made an investigation which resulted in showing that Raby was less than 100 years old. Here, too, the census reports for several decades gave his age at nearly 40 years less than he claimed during the last years of his life, and this age was found to correspond with the age of the only Noah Raby in the navy records upon his enlistment in the navy nearly forty years after Noah claimed to have joined it.

Paper From Cotton Stalks

W HAT is thought to be the first pulp mill established anywhere for making paper pulp and paper from cotton stalks is in operation at Greenwood, in Mississippi.

The fibre of the cotton plant supplies excellent cellulose for durable papers. The particular fibre in question is a thin walled tube that collapses in a peculiar twisted manner in the beating process, interlaces better than other fibres in the felting process and holds its grip tenaciously. It is strong, flexible, durable and light and has double the tensile strength of the stock ordinarily used to make wrapping paper.

Large quantities of old cotton stalks are delivered at the site of this mill and paid for at the rate of about \$3 a ton. It is said that the mill consumes daily 150 tons of stalk, from which is produced 50 tons of valuable pulp.

The annual supply of cotton stalks in the Southern States is about seventy-five million tons. If only a quarter of that were utilized it would mean a production of approximately six billion tons of paper a year, the value of which would exceed three hundred million dollars.

Mystery of a Silent Partner

ON one of the East Side streets near Fifth avenue a pretty window has been displaying charming hats with a cachet of their own, varied according to the approaching seasons. It is said to have been much frequented by women in search of "creations" whose curiosity was naturally awakened as to the name of the genius to whom they are indebted for the original headgear.

On the window were lettered two names, Odette and Olivette. The former was the pretty young woman who seemed to divide her time between the workroom and the salesroom, but Olivette the customers had never seen. And whether Odette was superintending the making of hats under the skylight in the rear or persuading an elderly client that apple green was not suited to her complexion, she was always accompanied by a small French bulldog of the female sex.

Quite often in making a selection of a new hat a customer would desire some little change in trimming, and in order to make her point clear she would ask to see Mlle. Olivette in order to explain it. But Mlle. Odette with an enigmatic smile and in the most pronounced American accent would reply:

"I am so sorry; but I will have to convey your wishes. I promise they shall be exactly carried out."

"Why can't I see Olivette?" cried the impatient customer, who wouldn't take no for an answer.

"There is no reason why you cannot," answered her partner, smiling still more enigmatically. However, even the most persistent and impatient client got no further and she went away thinking there must be some mystery about the charming little shop.

The census man, who happened to be a woman, was not to be fubbed off by enigmatical smiles and insisted on her legal right to see both partners. Odette was

bowled over by the mere thought of the law and so the mystery was cleared up. She pointed to the faithful French bulldog, who was at her skirt as usual and said:

"This is my partner, Olivette."

"Your dog?"

"Olivette is not merely my partner, she is the financial backer as well. She put up all the money behind the concern."

And then the story came out. Odette used to be a typist and had impossible dreams of going into business making pretty hats and selling them. But where was the rent of a shop to come from, to say nothing of stock, milliners' wages, etc.? It was a dream impossible of attainment. Then one day the incredible happened. On her way down town, as she emerged from the Wall street subway station, a little black thing flashed out of a passing motor car and fell straight into her arms. It was the prettiest little lady bulldog imaginable and it began to lick Odette's fingers, which had tightened over the warm little body as if in excuse of its rough and ready onset. Odette's heart warmed to her find.

A few days later she read an advertisement offering a reward for the return of a black French bulldog that had leaped out of a motor car near Wall street. Regretfully Odette took the dog back herself one evening after the day's business. The address was a fine house in Fifty-seventh street and the mistress of it came down herself to take back her pet. She was an old lady with lively black eyes and she sat down and asked Odette to tell her all about herself. Odette did, and while she was talking Olivette climbed into her lap.

"Why, I really believe my dog loves you best!" exclaimed the old lady, "and if that is so I am going to set you both up in business." She really did this strange thing, and so the inscription "Odette and Olivette" went up on the window of a little shop. The partners are always in agreement, because the junior partner never interferes.